Exploding English: Criticism, Theory, Culture. By BERNARD BERGONZI Pp. xii+240. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. £25.

Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction. By ROGER WEBSTER Pp. vi+122 London: Edward Arnold, 1990. £3·95

The Empathic Reader: A Study of the Narcissistic Character and the Drama of the Self. By J. BROOKS BOUSON. Pp. x+204. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989. £16·75.

Exploding English is a substantial contribution to the debate on the troubled condition of English studies As Bergonzi notes, it is hard to make the problems currently besetting the academic study of English intelligible to those who are not involved in it (p 172). At a time when English in its present form is seen to be under threat, any serious attempt to analyse its problems and prospects for a wide audience is welcome. Interested outsiders as well as academics, prospective as well as present students, and those with administrative responsibility for the future course of English studies could all benefit from reading this book.

The author, now a Professor of English at Warwick, draws on his long experience as teacher, scholar, and administrator. His book has an autobiographical aspect, then, being as much a disillusioned memoir as a reasoned defence of the humanist academy, and anecdote sometimes displaces analysis. The book is part description and part prescription. The crucial intellectual problem described is the place of modern literary theory in English studies. Bergonzi is open-minded as to the general value of theory, but he is unable—by his own admission (p. 109)—to assess much of it His chapter on Jacques Derrida amounts to an understandable but unhelpful complaint that Derrida's work is difficult (p. 129)

As Bergonzi's title suggests, there has been an explosion in English studies—an expansion of the canon, a proliferation of ways of reading, but also a confused fragmentation. He argues that such fragmentation was predetermined by the fragility of the original synthesis which constituted English (p. 26). Bergonzi sees theory as a 'symptom' of fragmentation, rather than a cause (p. 96). Dialogue becomes problematic in so far as theorists and anti-theorists lack a common frame of reference (p 25), and Bergonzi sketches some of the resulting clashes with a wry humour resembling that of David Lodge, whose academic novels assume a documentary role here. Bergonzi views the trend towards specialization and professionalization with regret He mounts an eloquent attack on the external pressures forcing the academic to publish, to produce what have become known as 'performance indicators', without regard for quality or usefulness of content (pp. 164, 170)

Bergonzi makes some practical recommendations. In departmental terms, he proposes secession or expulsion, with a poetry course designed for a suitably equipped minority securing its approach to the aesthetic Parnassus by excluding everything else (pp. 192–4). This surplus—which includes the novel as well as literary theory, media studies, and so on—is to be reconstituted as Cultural Studies. As Bergonzi acknowledges, his proposal seems unlikely to find general acceptance. His course on poetry as rhetoric is bound to be contaminated by the theoretical problems which it aims to exclude, if there is no such thing as an untheoretical stance. Moreover, rhetoric—which Bergonzi takes to be a relatively unproblematical category (pp. 94, 196)—is itself a focus for the work of Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Derrida, and other excluded theorists who would strongly agree with Bergonzi that reading is as difficult as it is necessary (pp. 202–3). While critical thinking on literature tends to elude curricular structures, pragmatic solutions must nevertheless be found to the crisis of legitimation which Bergonzi identifies. He ends with the warning that the institution of English may suffer the chronic decline which befell the Spanish Empire (p. 204).

The other two books under review do not show literary theory at its best *Studying Literary Theory* attempts to show how theory has disrupted English studies. Outlining the problems of experiential, intentionalistic and character-based approaches to literature, Webster presents a basic introduction to linguistics, narratology, structuralism, Marxism-historicism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism. There are several such introductions available, and there may not be room for another. Webster is prone to vagueness, and, while properly emphasizing the heterogeneity of theoretically-informed approaches, he implies that traditional criticism is homogeneous Here Bergonzi acts as a corrective. In his account of psychoanalysis, Webster puts too much weight on a crudely applied approach (pp. 85–7)—and '*subconscious*' is not a synonym for '*preconscious*' (p. 84). There is not enough guiding documentation: the lists of further reading are short, and a student may be bewildered by the brief mentions of Heidegger (p 34), Bloom (p. 97), and de Man—who was not 'American' (p. 104)

The Empathic Reader is a bold attempt to apply the psychoanalytic self-psychology of Heinz Kohut to literature (p. 3). Bouson begins with Kohut's theoretical work on narcissism and empathy. Despite the importance of Kohut's relationship to Freud, Bouson merely repeats his criticism that Freud's work is too reliant on science and cognition (pp. 11–13), while almost ignoring Freud himself Furthermore, she neglects the French rereading of Freud, which has been crucial for literary study in recent years, and marginalizes the unconscious, which is usually a defining feature of psychoanalysis. The unfamiliarity of the book's theoretical stance is one of its attractions, but it lacks a critical perspective on Kohut as such. Bouson also splits infinitives with alarming regularity.

She discusses fiction in English and English translation by Dostoevsky, Kafka, Bellow, Conrad, Mann, Lessing, Woolf, and Atwood. These authors are made to tell more or less the same story, the story of the narcissistic self and its disorders (p. 154). Bouson emphasizes that the 'self' is a construct which should not be reified (pp 14–15), but she nevertheless writes as if the self were an entity to be addressed behind the literary discourse of the 'character' (pp. 28–9, 90, 103). This address involves the trope of prosopopeia, which is mentioned by Bergonzi but not by Bouson. Her movement from text to psyche is never questioned (p 62), and she merely assumes that the authorial origin of a work can be determined. She relies on a psychologistic vocabulary without much theoretical support: *psychosymbol*, *psychocenter*, *psychodrama*, *psychonarrative*, *psychojourney*. In each chapter, Bouson rehearses relevant criticism, which is interesting in so far as it shows the critic repeating aspects of the text in a kind of transference. She refers to Shoshana Felman's classic analysis of this phenomenon (p 25), but without explaining that Felman employs a Lacanian-deconstructive approach which is quite at odds with her own. Here—and in her discussion of the reader's drive for mastery over the text (p 116)—the makings of an altogether different book can be sensed Instead, Bouson offers lame generalizations about the psychological function of 'literature' (pp. 171–2) Literature may be precisely what is elided when clinical psychology is thus applied.

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